

Russia's Profile VS Changes

22 July 2008

Russia

ДЗЕРКАЛО ТИЖНЯ

Regrettably enough, Ukraine's image created by the Russian mass media and Russia's image as created by the Ukrainian mass media are far from the truth. So what is Russia really like today? In the common stereotyped view, Russia appears to be an authoritarian energy state with military and law enforcers dominating the highest echelons of power and practicing a unique form of government called "sovereign democracy". According to American historian Richard Pipes, Russia strives to become a superpower by using its advantage of natural resources over other countries, and as long as it does so, it poses no threat to more developed economies.

Many experts regard the Russian "tandemocracy" [Putin-Medvedev tandem democracy] as a component part of some "transition stage" (which, in fact, has been characteristic of that country for centuries of its existence).

This transition is permanent and unpredictable. Russian mass media work hard to paint a light at the end of this tunnel of transition, but the picture is not adequate to what is really happening in the country. Winston Churchill was right in calling Russia an enigma wrapped in an enigma inside an enigma.

"Go Russia Go!"

This yell of Russian football fans sounds louder and louder all over the vast expanse of the country. Every success achieved in sports or music is praised and exalted as a historic exploit and accompanied by patriotic campaigns. Take, for instance, that huge banner with a portrait of Peter the Great at the Euro-2008 match versus Sweden. (And what if Russia had played the final match versus Germany?) At the same time, any phrase, even harmless and unintentional, that goes "against the grain" dooms even pop stars to blame and censure.

Interestingly, in the recent national poll "Name of Russia" televised by the Rossiya channel, the pedestal was topped by Peter the Great, Stalin, and Lenin. Two and a half million votes that came in via the Internet changed the picture a little: Peter the Great was replaced by Nicholas II. Such names as Ivan Bunin, Alexander Block, Ivan Turgenev, and Fyodor Shalyapin were at the bottom end of the list. Of course, Russia is still the homeland of Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lomonosov, but it is already a nation idolizing czars, military leaders, and conquerors.

Such chauvinistic patriotism is part and parcel of the political course set by Vladimir Putin in an asymmetric response to endless accusations of "defective democracy", "limited freedoms", and "persecution of the opposition". However, since this process involves "alien enemies" and "homebred renegades", it is double-edged. According to experts with the Russian analytical center Sova, "the ideas of grassroots ethnic nationalism have moved from the margins to the mainstream of public conscience" and "the ethnic language" has become an important tool in the hands of political leaders". Sova experts assess the situation as "alarming", noting a steady 20-percent annual increase in the number of crimes committed in Russia on ethnic grounds.

The recent parliamentary and presidential election campaigns in Russia, which were sickeningly predictable and Soviet-fashioned, were actually built on the ideology of "fighting internal and external enemies".

Addressing a huge canvassing rally in Moscow in November 2007, incumbent president Vladimir Putin dotted the i: "Those who confront us are against our plan, because they have entirely different goals and views. They need a weak and ailing state. They need a disoriented and divided society... Unfortunately, there are some people in this country who haunt foreign embassies and offices and count on support from foreign funds and governments, not from their own nation."

Ukraine is also in that number. The well-balanced, well-greased, and well-fueled Russian propagandistic machine exposes it as a country where a) the leadership drags its people into the hostile North-Atlantic Alliance; b) the Russian language and culture are mercilessly scrubbed out; c) the Russian Black Sea Fleet is forced to leave the "primordially Russian" peninsula of Crimea; d) WWII criminals are lauded; and e) common history is distorted and abused.

The results of such ideological lobotomy are as evident as they are predictable. The poll conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Study Center in April showed that 25 percent of Russians viewed the USA as an enemy of their country; the same number of people called Georgia their enemy; and 21 percent mentioned Ukraine among Russia's worst enemies. Such an attitude is definitely detrimental to relations between the two nations.

Just a year ago, in August 2007, opinions were not so negative: only seven percent of respondents admitted to enmity in relation to Ukraine (while the USA, Georgia, the UK, and the Baltic countries were called enemies by 24, 19, and 7 percent of respondents, respectively). Moreover, in May 2007, according to the same center, 42 percent of Russians believed it would be good to unite with Belarus, 36 percent were for a union with Ukraine, and 30 percent – with Kazakhstan. Just one year – and the gap between Russia and Ukraine has become so strikingly wide!

At the same time, Ukrainian's attitude to their aggressively disposed neighbor remains more than amicable. According to returns of the December 2007 poll conducted by the Razumkov Center of Economic and Political Studies, 67.3 percent of Ukrainians were for closer cooperation with Russia. They believed in the power of family bonds, the shared history, common economic interests, and, to a lesser degree, the two leaderships' political will and common political interests...

What Is Medvedev?

George Bush calls Dmitry Medvedev "a clever guy" and speculation still continues on whether the new Russian president is an independent leader or Putin's proxy. The *Economist* gives a clear answer – "neither" – and describes Putin as the real manager of the government, treasury, and television. Besides, he is more popular than Medvedev: Putin's name in the Kremlin is "boss" and Medvedev's is diminutive – "Dima"...

According to sociological surveys conducted in June and July 2008, Putin's popularity rating varied between 57 and 62 percent while Medvedev's stood at 37-42 percent. Between 73 and 76 percent of Russians approved and 10-13 percent disapproved of Putin's activity at the head of the government. Medvedev's rating was 66-68 percent vs. 10-13 percent, respectively. Time will show how long this iconic image of Putin will last.

Putin still enjoys the highest guest status in his country and abroad. The Russian mass media give balanced coverage to Putin's and Medvedev's activities – something new for that country. Addressing the Duma right upon his appointment, Prime Minister Putin sounded like the one and only leader of the nation.

However, Medvedev has already stated very clearly that the country's foreign policy is the president's prerogative. His new anticorruption initiatives and unambiguous statements about Russia's "eternal karma" of centralized presidential governance have sent clear signals to those who may have devised a parliamentary model of government. Medvedev unswervingly follows the guidelines set by his predecessor – with the same philosophy, content, priorities, and even vocabulary. Actually, Medvedev took off in one plane with Putin as the copilot, but he is too ambitious to play second fiddle.

The real correlation between the president's and the prime minister's powers will become clearer in a few months. This fall, Medvedev plans to reform the Security Council and vest it with serious powers: its resolutions and directives will be ultimate and binding for all executive bodies, including the central government.

According to O. Kryzhanovskaya, an authoritative Russian sociologist, despite permanent reshuffles in the top echelon, the "backbone" remains the same: there are always 60 percent of top-rank officials who come from law enforcement agencies and special services. Yet, the new president has to liberalize Russia's political life if he wants his country at least to resemble a democracy and be on par with European states with their system of values and to lead other post-USSR countries.

Addressing German politicians and businesspeople in Berlin in June, Medvedev stated, "The Russian and European democracies share common humanitarian roots and we have the same set of values." So far, his words deserve little faith, judging from the way Russian authorities "handle" freedom of expression, especially during election campaigns where foreign observers are unwelcome.

Legacy

On one hand, Putin managed to lead the country out of post-Yeltsin prostration, cement vertical power, take control of the provinces, achieve sociopolitical and macroeconomic stability, and strengthen Russia's international authority. On the other hand, he achieved all this through administrative methods and largely thanks to unprecedented price hikes on the global fuel market. In 1999, when FSB chief Vladimir Putin was promoted to prime minister, one barrel of Brent oil was \$17.9, and now the price has soared to \$140. The price of Russian natural gas in the EU has grown from \$64 per 1,000 cu m in 1999 to \$410. Subsequently, according to expert estimates, Gazprom's annual proceeds from gas exports have increased from \$6.8 billion to \$38 billion.

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At the same time, Russia's macroeconomic stability is increasingly affected by high inflation and food price hikes; considerable financial resources are pumped into state-run corporations and spent on social needs; and economic growth is hampered by widespread corruption. Last year Russia slumped down from 120th to 143rd position in the Transparency International corruption rating of 160 countries, joining Gambia, Indonesia, and Togo. In 2007 Russia led all CIS countries in the WEF integral competitiveness rating but was only 58th in the list of 131 economies.

Another problem is the inability of its outdated post-Soviet infrastructures and inflexible human resources to meet growing consumer and investment demands. Russian economists are seriously concerned about salaries growing faster than labor productivity – basically owing to the surplus of “oil dollars” rather than higher quality labor. According to Rosstat [State Statistics Committee of Russia], in the past twelve months, the number of employed Russians has grown by a mere 300,000. The federal migration program is slack and cannot solve this issue. Neither can the relatively cheap immigrant workforce from other CIS countries or China.

Besides the rapidly increasing influx of Chinese workers to the Far East, the Kremlin is confronted by ethnic disproportions in birth rates in different regions of the country. In a couple of decades the Muslim community is expected to become the most numerous and Islam – the dominant religion in the country.

Putin also “handed down” unresolved social problems. In 2007 more than 22 million Russians lived below the poverty line. In the past two years, the number of very rich citizens has grown sharply while the number of low-income citizens has decreased by a mere seven percent.

According to a July poll, Russians are primarily concerned about growing prices (82%); poverty (45%); and the sharply widening gap between the richer and the poorer (35%). Notably, this year the Russian market rated first in Europe by the number of sold cars (1,645,000 worth \$33,800M sold in the first half of the year).

At the same time, only two percent of Russians are concerned about trampled civil rights and limited democratic freedoms.

Putin's parliamentary legacy is quite agreeable for his successor. The December 2007 election gave the president total control over both houses of the parliament with very moderate opposition in the person of the tractable Liberal Democrats and the “reasonable” Communists. The democratic opposition represented by the SPS, Yabloko, the United Civil Front, and separate groups of human rights organizations was pressed back to the political periphery.

On July 10, the united democratic opposition made public its program, “300 Steps to Freedom”. The first step consists in “immediate and unconditional abolition of censorship and return to full freedom of speech”. The last step should be “transfer of capital from Moscow to the middle part of the country”. If such a surrealistic scenario ever came true, the country would be anything but Russia.

Many-Faced Russia

Russia keeps searching for its place in the global community and geopolitical processes. On one hand, it acts as “a superpower” with convincing “carbohydrate responses” to challenges. It did so in early January of 2006, when it demonstratively shut off its gas tap “to put Ukraine in its place”. It did so last September in response to the “undesirable” returns of the preterm parliamentary election in Ukraine. Last week Russia halved its crude oil supply to the Czech Republic in response to the Prague agreement on deployment of a U.S. missile defense radar there.

On the other hand, Russia is uniquely self-sufficient in terms of gold currency reserves, which can help it weather any fluctuations on the global fuel market.

It should be noted that “energy pressure” is not the only element of the Kremlin's policy. Moscow tries to initiate new international mechanisms of partnership. Recently it suggested creating a kind of “grain alliance” similar to OPEC. On June 5, in Berlin Medvedev proposed to convene a European summit for concluding a regional security and arms control pact. He specifically proposed to proceed from “purely national interests, not distorted by any political motives”.

It is obvious that a comprehensive and unbiased assessment of the current processes in Russia can help Ukrainian policymakers to overcome stereotypes and abandon black-and-white approaches, make their dialog with Moscow more transparent and pragmatic, and dissolve the ideological discrepancies. And finally, the better they come to know Russia and its development trends, the sooner they can choose the right strategy in relation to Russia.

Ukraine and Russia, which have proclaimed each other strategic partners, are today acting in a mode of confrontation not caring about future partnership. As a result, out medium term relations might be a combination of cooperation, competition and conflicts; numerous declarations and threats might turn into real actions and challenges, in response to which our politicians would have to review the National security strategy of Ukraine.

These are just several features of Russia's profile. Undoubtedly, Russia is a great country with an amazing history and unique people. However, understanding of this is coming not only from official propaganda, victorious statements of the high and mighty and emotional speeches of inveterate patriots but from the hope that the new generation of the Russians will build a competitive, modern European state with high democratic and social standards. Partnership with such a country would be attractive for its neighbors, which also feel a severe pain of post-Soviet division but nevertheless, they try to build their future not resurrecting shadows of the past.

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